

## World-System and “Trans”-Modernity

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In this short text I begin anew a reflection that has concerned me since the beginning of the 1960s. I will radicalize some theoretical options by finding in recent scholarship very plausible hypotheses that have until now been regarded as trivial. Understanding the “centrality” of Europe as just two centuries old allows us to suppose that what has not been subsumed by modernity stands a good chance of emerging strongly and being rediscovered not as an antihistorical miracle, but as the resurgence of a recent potentiality in many of the cultures blinded by the dazzling “brightness”—in many cases only apparent—of Western culture and modernity. This modernity’s technical and economic globality is far from being a cultural globalization of everyday life that valorizes the majority of humanity. From this omitted potentiality and altering “exteriority” emerges a project of “trans”-modernity, a “beyond” that transcends Western modernity (since the West has never adopted it but, rather, has scorned it and valued it as “nothing”) and that will have a creative function of great significance in the twenty-first century.

To repeat: the thesis advanced in this essay is that modernity’s recent impact on the planet’s multiple cultures (Chinese, Southeast Asian, Hindu, Islamic, Bantu, Latin American) produced a varied “reply” by all of them to the modern “challenge.” Renewed, they are now erupting on a cultural horizon “beyond” modernity. I call the reality of that fertile multicultural moment “*trans*”-modernity (since “post”-modernity is just the latest moment of Western modernity). China, a privileged but not exclusive example, shows us just how recent a phenomenon European hegemony is, only two centuries old and only beginning to influence the intimacy of non-European everyday life in the last fifty years (since World War II), principally because of the mass media, especially television.<sup>1</sup>

**A Hypothesis That Still Has Eurocentric Elements:  
The “World-System”**

The world-system “hypothesis” emerged as a response to the first Eurocentrism, which thought that Europe, since its supposed Greek and Medieval Latin origins, produced “from *within*” the values and the instrumental systems (as argued by Hegel, Marx, Weber, and Sombart) that were universalized in the last five centuries, that is, in the time of modernity. This Eurocentric position—first formulated at the end of the eighteenth century<sup>2</sup> by the French and English “Enlightenment” and the German “Romantics”—reinterpreted all of world history, projecting Europe into the past and attempting to show that everything that happened before had led to Europe’s becoming, in Hegel’s (1955, 235) words, “the end and center of world history.” The distortion of history begins with the Encyclopedists (Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Laws* [1989 {1748}] is a good example)<sup>3</sup> but continues with the English “Enlightenment” thinkers, Kant in Germany, and finally Hegel, for whom the “Orient” was humanity’s “infancy” (*Kindheit*), the place of despotism and unfreedom from which the Spirit (*Volksggeist*) would later soar toward the West, as if on a path toward the full realization of liberty and civilization. Since the beginning, Europe had been chosen by Destiny as the final meaning of universal history.

Counter to this, the world-system perspective attempted to show that, starting with the discovery of America at the end of the fifteenth century, Europe began to deploy the world-system as a failed imperial world; such a “worldwide” system could not have existed before. Inspired by Fernand Braudel’s historical exposition of the “longue durée,” Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 15) had the creative idea of writing the history of this process: “In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, there came into existence what we may call a European world-economy.” For many this perspective subsumes the older Latin American dependency theory, giving it a more plausible historical framework rather than negating it. By limiting Europe’s “centrality” to the last five centuries, world-system theory removed the continent’s “aura” of being the eternal “center” of world history. “Modernity” is thus the management of the world-system’s “centrality.” That is why, for me, Spain and Portugal, as a prolongation of Genoese capital (Arrighi 1994), are the “first modernity.”<sup>4</sup> For example, Bartolomé de las Casas’s confrontation with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda marks the beginning of modernity’s antidiscourse (Ginés being a modern intellectual, an expression of the hegemonic Eurocentric vision of the time). Even James

M. Blaut (1993) links the “rise of Europe” with the discovery of America in 1492, and Marx himself (quoted in Wallerstein 1974, 77) notes that the discovery is a fundamental moment for the origin of capitalism and “primitive accumulation.”

In my recent book, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* (Dussel 1998a, 52), I show why Spain, and not Portugal, a Maghreb Islamic nation, or China, could discover America. But starting from this anti-Eurocentric hypothesis (that is, countering the “first” Eurocentrism), the “discovery of America” simultaneously and necessarily indicates the world-system, capitalism, and modernity (for me, that is, not for Wallerstein, who reserves the concept of “modernity” for the “Enlightenment”—a position for which I myself will supply an argument here, in order to give this thesis a different meaning).

In any case, the world-system “hypothesis” supposed that the “rise of the West” began with the comparative advantage that modern Europe (especially the Renaissance) gained through the great scientific discoveries, precious metals (silver and gold), the new labor force incorporated into the system (Indians and, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, African slaves in the Americas), the new comestibles (the Inca potato, corn, the Mexican *tomatl* and *chocolatl*, etc.),<sup>5</sup> the millions of kilometers incorporated by the conquest into European colonial agriculture, and the invention of new economic instruments. All of this allowed Europe to triumph in its competition with the Islamic world, Hindustan, Southeast Asia, and China. Thanks to the caravel (discovered by the Portuguese in 1441), the Europeans were also the only ones who could cross the oceans and arm their ships with high-powered canons. This in turn allowed them to dominate first the Atlantic (which, starting in the sixteenth century, was supposedly the geopolitical “center” of the world) and later the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Europe created the world-system thanks to the invasion of the Americas (the “discovery”); the displacement of this system would have to emerge “from *within*” the process of globalization that started in 1492 and intensified toward the end of the twentieth century.

Without contradicting this perspective, although implying a completely different intellectual commitment, the concept of “post”-modernity (the A moment I will show in figure 2) indicates that there is a process that emerges “from *within*” modernity and reveals a state of crisis within globalization. “Trans”-modernity, in contrast, demands a whole new interpretation of modernity in order to include moments that were never incorporated into the European version. Subsuming the best of globalized European and

North American modernity, “trans”-modernity affirms “from *without*” the essential components of modernity’s own excluded cultures in order to develop a new civilization for the twenty-first century. Accepting this massive exteriority to European modernity allows one to comprehend that there are cultural moments situated “outside” of modernity. To achieve this, an interpretation that supposes a “second” and very subtle Eurocentrism must be overcome.<sup>6</sup> One can then shift to a non-Eurocentric interpretation of the history of the world-system, a system only hegemonized by Europe for the last two hundred years (not five hundred). The emergence of other cultures, until now depreciated and unvalued, from beyond the horizon of European modernity is thus not a miracle arising from nothingness, but rather a return by these cultures to their status as actors in the history of the world-system. Although Western culture is globalizing—on a certain technical, economic, political, and military level—this does not efface other moments of enormous creativity on these same levels, moments that affirm from their “exteriority” other cultures that are alive, resistant, and growing.

#### **What Was China’s Significance in the “World-System” until the Eighteenth Century?**

China is one example that demonstrates the degree to which European world hegemony was impossible before the Industrial Revolution. In *Ética de la liberación* (Dussel 1998a, 52–54), I showed that the reason China could not be hegemonic in the “new system” that emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the reason it did not discover America, was not because it was inferior to the Europe of the time (either from an economic, a cultural, a technical, or even a scientific point of view), but because the “center” of the “interregional system”<sup>7</sup> was west of China, in Hindustan and the Islamic world. America was beyond its horizon—if the Chinese did arrive in Alaska or California, they did not find anything of commercial interest. As a result, China was believed to have remained peripheral because, while the Italian Renaissance was the beginning of modernity (Giovanni Arrighi’s thesis), in China there was at most a proto-renaissance in a few of the large cities like Hangzhou. But this process was aborted before the expansive colonialism of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and later the English and French, arrived in China. China was thus neither modern nor capitalist, nor did it carry any weight; it remained in the “dark night” of Oriental despotism, in the “Asiatic mode of production.”

In *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998), Andre Gunder Frank proposes what amounts to a new argument for the concept of

“trans”-modernity (not just “post”-modernity) since, as he shows, great universal cultures flourished until the nineteenth century, totally independent of modern Europe.<sup>8</sup> I will briefly indicate some of Frank’s more tenable arguments and, at the same time, show where I differ.<sup>9</sup>

It is a banality—and yet the obvious frequently hides great truths—that until the eighteenth century Europeans considered China to be an economic, political, and cultural power.<sup>10</sup> In *The Wealth of Nations* (1976 [1776], 80), Adam Smith often comments on China’s greatness, its economic importance, and its low salaries: “China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world. . . . The accounts of all travelers, inconsistent in many other respects, agree in the low wages of labour, and in the difficulty which a labourer finds in bringing up a family in China.” Notice how Smith uses the terms *industrious* and *wage*, just as he does in referring to England or Scotland, which makes it seem unlikely that such manufacturing “industriousness” and such a “salary” would not produce for the factory owners a “surplus” in the strict sense: “The course of human prosperity, indeed, seems scarce ever to have been of so long continuance as to enable any great country to acquire capital sufficient for all those three purposes; unless, perhaps, we give credit to the wonderful accounts of the wealth and cultivation of China” (388–89). “*China is a much richer country than any part of Europe*, and the difference between the price of subsistence in China and in Europe is very great. Rice in China is much cheaper than wheat is any-where in Europe” (210; my emphasis). The life of the elite is much more developed in China than in Europe (this is the “luxury” that Werner Sombart (1965 [1913]) requires for capitalism): “The retinue of a grandee in China or Indostan accordingly is, by all accounts, much more numerous and splendid than that of the richest subjects in Europe” (228). Nevertheless, the enormous masses of China’s workers are poorer: “But the real price of labour, the real quantity of the necessaries of life which is given to the labourer, it has already been observed, is lower both in China and Indostan, the two great markets of India, than it is through the greater part of Europe” (229). For Adam Smith the discovery of Spanish America permitted Europe to buy from both markets (the two richest in the world-system and the most varied in the world prior to the Industrial Revolution): “The silver of the new continent seems in this manner to be one of the principal commodities by which the commerce between the *two extremities [sic] of the old one* is carried on, and it is by means of it, in a great measure, that those distant parts of the world are connected with one another” (230).

It is interesting to note that the “two extremities” of the *old* “interregional system” connected in the *new* system, with the “New World” constituting the “*first* world-system.” Europe was able to “buy,” thanks to Latin American (Peruvian, Mexican) money, in the Chinese “market”; that is to say, Europe could “sell” very few commodities (except silver) that were the fruit of its “industriousness” in the subsumption of European “wage labor” because it was a productively “underdeveloped” region that could not compete with China’s more “developed” commodity production, which included porcelain utensils, silk textiles, and so on. Europe’s colonies also gave it a cheaper source of “silver-money”: “In China, a country much richer than any part of Europe, the value of the precious metals is much higher than in any part of Europe. As the wealth of Europe, indeed, has increased greatly since the discovery of the mines of America, so the value of gold and silver has gradually diminished” (264). The crisis of the Chinese and Hindustani production and distribution system in the “old system” (the first capitalist system?), resulting from causes that need to be studied more comprehensively, permitted the “rise of the West.”<sup>11</sup>

Max Weber had the intuition that if Europe not been the region most prepared to carry out the Industrial Revolution, it would have been China or Hindustan. He thus devoted his sociological works, on a religious and ethical level, to showing why China and India did not give rise to capitalist society. His voluminous research produced the same answer time and again: China and Hindustan could not be capitalist because of their corporate property regime, because they had a bureaucracy that impeded competition, and so on. Conversely, studying the ethics of the prophets of Israel, Weber found that, as far back as this, the long road was being built that would lead to capitalist modernity; the last stage of this road would be the reform promoted by Calvinist ethics (the conditions for the realization of the capitalist system).<sup>12</sup> Calvinist individualism, wealth considered as a divine blessing, competition, private property, and the discipline of an austere subjectivity made the birth of capitalism possible, conditions not found in Chinese corporatism or in the magical quasi-feudalism of Hindustani Brahmanic culture.<sup>13</sup>

In my estimation it is impossible that the millions of salaried workers in porcelain production (in the region surrounding the city of Xi’an, between the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, from which the “silk road” traveled westward) or in the silk textile mills (along the Yellow River and near the East Coast cities of Zhangzhou and Fuzhou) did not produce surplus value as defined by Marx. At the least we can say that this was

a regional capitalist system—even if it had only *formal* subsumption of the labor process and obtained absolute surplus value, as I have already indicated—that was aborted for political reasons. This is very far from, and much more complex than, a simple “Asiatic mode of production.”

It would seem, then, that until the eighteenth century, China was the greatest producer of commodities, and that the China Sea was an unequalled mercantile site within the world-system (because of the articulation of the Old World with the New World since 1492).

Andre Gunder Frank has studied some of the causes of the crises in China and Hindustan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Ming dynasty (1368–1644),<sup>14</sup> which founded the highly developed Chinese empire (which included capitalist regions), went into a relative crisis with the arrival of the Manchurian dynasty (1644–1796). In Europe, this was a time when the rococo “Chinese style” (*chinoiserie*) became fashionable (porcelain utensils, lacquered paintings on wood, baldachins in the gardens to have tea, decorated Chinese pavilions, silk for wide-sleeved garments, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

We could also show the importance of the economic and cultural systems of Hindustan and Southeast Asia, for which the Islamic invasions in the north of India and Indochina were both a destabilizing factor and an unexpected commercial connection.

### **Reconstructing the Meaning of “Early Modernity” (Fifteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)**

My interpretation of a “first modernity,” with Spain and Portugal in the forefront (i.e., as the first deployment of the “world-system”) thanks to their “discovery” of Spanish America, needs to be profoundly reconstructed, taking into account a strong Chinese and Hindustani presence until the eighteenth century. Indeed, the “old system”—Adam Smith’s “old world,” which I have called the “third Asiatic-Afro-Mediterranean interregional system” (see Dussel 1998a, 36–42)—is prolonged by China’s enormous productive weight from 1400 to 1800 (a period in which it had mercantile or formal capitalist regions but, lacking influence over the oceans and thus being enclosed within its national horizon, no global presence). In contrast, the annexation of Indian America in 1492 by Spain initiated Europe’s deployment of the now truly “*world-system*.” But we should be aware that, although it was reconnected for the first time in the fifteenth century, Europe had enjoyed only peripheral significance with respect to the economic and cultural Asiatic continental space since the Islamic expansion separated

Europe from Africa and Asia in the seventh century.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to silver and, to a lesser extent, gold, Spain (and, through Spain, Europe) had the “money” to “buy” in the Chinese market. Contributing to this process were the evolving use of the “precious metals” as money (the origin of money capitalism) and the lack of silver in the Chinese system’s external market. (Although China did not have colonies, it did productively dominate the Southeast Asian economy; one purchased entry into this market with silver.) From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, American precious metals entered Europe from two directions: (1) across the Atlantic from the Caribbean to Seville, and from there to Amsterdam or Central Europe, or from Genoa and Venice to the eastern Mediterranean and, thanks to the Islamic connection, on to Hindustan and China; or (2) across the Pacific, from Peru and Acapulco, Mexico, through the Philippines and China. The “old world” was thus the extreme West of the emerging “world-system,” a secondary region in terms of commodity production: Europe could sell little to China and could only buy with the “money” of Spanish America.

This period of the European “first modernity” (Dussel 1998c)—the Hispanic, humanist, pecuniary, manufacturing, and mercantile modernity—only developed with hegemony over the Atlantic, which was not yet the geopolitical “center” of the world-system (something the China Sea in Southeast Asia, continued to be). In the “longue durée” and the “world space,” European modernity was still peripheral to the Hindustani and Chinese world, and even to the Islamic one in terms of links to the “East.”

In this period the “coloniality of power” was produced: European power, under the weight of the East, had its own periphery, the new colonies in first Latin, then Anglo-Saxon America, a few small, slave-trading enclaves or regions on the western coast of Africa, and some islands, ports, and bases of support in the Islamic world and in the Far East, thanks to which it could “buy” in the market of Chinese and Hindustani commodities. China, having closed itself off in a nationalist project, lost its external market.

Just as Greece before Alexander was a periphery of the Persian-Egyptian world and later attained hegemony with Alexandrian Hellenism, peripheral Europe would grow stronger during modernity’s first period under the weight of the Hindustani and Chinese economy. While China remained a continental power with an external market that was nearby but insignificant relative to its enormous internal market, Europe, still recovering demographically from the depopulation of the plague, turned outward.<sup>17</sup> After the failure of its eastern territorial expansion (the Crusades), it focused on the oceans, led by Portugal and Spain (initially supported by Genoa and



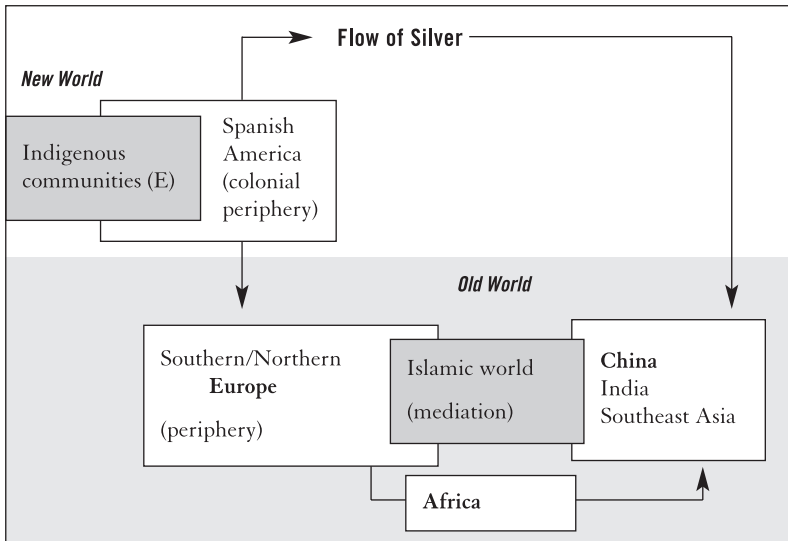
later overtaken by Holland, the United Kingdom, and France). Thanks to the “external” contacts of 1492 through the mid-seventeenth century, a revolution occurred in astronomy, in the sciences, and in Europe’s way of seeing the world. This ideological-scientific revolution followed the path of Spain and Portugal, where Carlos V had taken up the achievements of the Italian Renaissance, and would culminate in Amsterdam (the former Spanish colony) and the United Kingdom.

Indigenous America felt the impact of the first globalization (i.e., the conquest), as well as racism, the myth of European superiority, economic exploitation, political domination, and the imposition of an external culture. All of these produced the “coloniality of power” syndrome (to borrow Aníbal Quijano’s suggestive expression): the colonizing power denied what was Amerindian and imposes what was European, based on a subtle but all-pervasive racism. In any case, the indigenous always retains a certain “exteriority” (what *E* represents in figure 1) in relation to the world-system. This is the first colonization, part of the “first modernity.”

From 1630 on, Amsterdam (Wallerstein 1980) continued the process of mercantile capitalism, in part replacing Portugal (and Genoa) in the Chinese-Hindustani world, but not fundamentally changing the structure of European dependence. Only 3 percent of Melaka’s commerce was in the hands of the Dutch, who had even less luck selling European products to Chinese or Hindustani merchants. They could “buy” with Spanish American silver in the Chinese market, and they militarily hegemonized the shipping routes, but this did not enable them to impose their own products. The Chinese were not interested in militarily protecting their market because in the East they had no visible enemies, and they enjoyed an almost total monopoly on global production, being the only ones who supplied the most required commodities: porcelain utensils, silk textiles, tea, and so on.

### **Only Two Centuries of European Global Hegemony: The People Excluded from Modernity**

European hegemony, principally British and French (although the latter to a lesser extent), was a result of the Industrial Revolution, in turn ideologically based on the “Enlightenment” and “Romanticism.” If we take the French Revolution (1789) as a symbolic starting date, this hegemony, as I have indicated, is just two centuries old. Europe was not *always* the “end and center of world history,” as Hegel believed; nor did it enjoy, since the prophets of Israel, ethical-political superiority, as Max Weber thought. It had not even been the “center” of the “world-system” since 1492. (As I



*Figure 1. The world-system at the end of the sixteenth century.*

have already suggested, world-system theory, although a critical position against the “first Eurocentrism” of Hegel or Weber, and against the European “common sense” still prevalent today, can now be considered to be the “second Eurocentrism,” since European hegemony is not five hundred, but only two hundred years old.)

The task now is to explain the rise of the West articulated with the decline of the East. This requires a global thinking that overcomes the “second” Eurocentrism. The world-system, which was born as such by annexing the “New World” (the Spanish American connection) to the “Old World” (comprised of two extremes: from a disconnected and secondary Europe to a prominent China and Hindustan), moves as a whole, like a heart, with its diastole and systole, whose first palpitation is situated in the East. The decadence of the East allowed the “center” of the world-system to be organized under Western control, although this did not occur instantaneously or miraculously (in this respect, Wallerstein’s criticism of Frank is correct). This reorganization also did not simply follow the exclusive conditions and attributes of previous European history (i.e., contra the method of interpretation that attempted to detect “intrinsically” Europe’s superiority over other cultures). To think “non-Eurocentrically” is to be able to imagine that the Industrial Revolution was Europe’s response to a “vacuum” in

the East Asian market, especially China and Hindustan; it is the effect of a structure (China’s being that of an imperial and autocratic state which impeded the triumph of the bourgeoisie) and of a crisis (a multiple political one produced by low salaries, the demographic explosion caused by the economic wealth accumulated since 1400, etc.). This “vacuum” attracted the “possibility” of being “filled” by a European production that had been growing since the fifteenth century. Marx correctly observed that market expansion, like all exchange, can lead to the expansion of production.<sup>18</sup> Given the high European salaries and the low population in the United Kingdom (relative to China and Hindustan) the only solution (i.e., the only way to expand production and lower the proportion of the salary in the value or price of the product) was to increase use of the machine.<sup>19</sup> In a few decades, the machine’s subsumption into the production process (which Marx describes adequately as the necessary means to create “relative surplus value” [see Dussel 2001]) gave Great Britain and France (and eventually all of Northern Europe) a significant comparative advantage over China, Hindustan, the Islamic world, Spanish America, and even Eastern and Southern Europe. This advantage was such that at the beginning of the nineteenth century (that is, by the 1820s, when Hegel gave his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* [1970] in Berlin, scarcely five decades after Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* [1776], described China as the richest country in the world) all of the “Orient”<sup>20</sup> would be seen as merely eternal and miserable “Oriental despotism.”

At the same time, Africa was being relegated even lower, as the continent of slaves (a view that ignored Egypt’s being a black African civilization [see Bernal 1987]). During the Berlin Congress of 1885 (little more than a century ago!) Africa would be divided up among the European powers. The South of Europe would remain, in the Eurocentric memory of the (Anglo-Saxon and Germanic) North, a moment of the late “Middle Ages” or the “northern part of Africa” (“Africa begins at the Pyrenees!”), and Latin America, with its indigenous and African population, would be relegated to the status of distant colonial world, on the periphery of the already semiperipheral and preindustrial Spain and Portugal.

The “Enlightenment” vision would block off like a cement wall the old “disconnected Europe,” the “Dark Age” Europe that until the fifteenth century, in the most optimistic scenario, was a periphery of the Islamic, Chinese, and Hindustani world—that “Oriental” world, much more “refined” and developed, from all points of view, that was the “center” of the old world, and the densest part of the world-system until the

end of the eighteenth century. From Hegel, Marx, and Comte to Weber—including Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Popper, Levinas, Foucault, Lyotard, and Habermas—Eurocentrism shines unopposed. And it would dominate the colonial world with the brilliance [*brillo*] of “Western culture,” as humanity’s most developed center “since the beginning” (even though it may be a qualitatively irreplaceable critical conscience, as in the case of Habermas until the present).

Europeans, in their “civilizing” expansion (“England has transformed itself into the missionary of civilization in the world,” Hegel [1970, 538] stated triumphantly), thus felt justified in covering over, excluding, and ignoring as nonexistent all cultures that preceded theirs, as well as those contemporary civilizations (those “peoples without history”) not worthy of notice by “Western Culture.” This process, by which modern Reason “excluded,” negated, and confined to “Exteriority”<sup>21</sup> all it considered worthless in terms of the modern values and “universal” criteria of civilization by which it deemed everything should be evaluated, rapidly extended itself from the beginning of the nineteenth century to all the non-European cultures. The results were surprisingly effective, so much so that those who were negated—given their evident industrial inferiority—applauded through their neocolonial elites (educated in Europe and later in the United States) a Eurocentric ideology that until very recently has had no critical opponent.

The exclusion, as a civilizing criterion, of everything non-European also gave Europe—which already had military, economic, and political hegemony—cultural and ideological domination. What was non-European finally disappeared from all practical and theoretical considerations. The Spanish and Portuguese (with respect to the first modernity) and the Chinese, the Hindustanis, and the members of the Islamic world, whether from Granada, Cairo, Baghdad, Samarqand, Delhi, Melaka, or Mindanao (with respect to their “centrality” in the Old World and to the beginning of the world-system until the end of the eighteenth century) would end up accepting the northern Eurocentric interpretation. Their Westernized elites, even those leading leftist revolutionary projects, like Mao Zedong (is *standard* Marxism not a modality of Eurocentric expansion?) and, according to Jean-Paul Sartre in his introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon, would become peripheral “echoes” of the superiority of Western culture, a vision today globalized by transnational corporations and global financial capital (see Hardt and Negri 2000).

In this sense, postmodernity is as Eurocentric as modernity.

**“Trans”-Modernity as an Affirmation of the Multiculturality  
Excluded by European Modernity**

The phenomenon of “postmodern” thought (Dussel 1999; 1998b, 54; 1996, 129; 1985) has habituated us to a certain critique of modernity and to a modernity in terms of the domination of the *cogito*’s quantity and subjectivity over the radical ontological understanding of being (Heidegger), as well as to critiques of instrumental reason (Horkheimer), of abstract universality from difference and the “différend” (Derrida, Lyotard), of the “pensiero forte” (Vattimo), and so on. “Postmodernity’s” critique of modernity does not question the centrality of Eurocentrism and, in a certain way, thinks that the postconventional, urban, postindustrial, freely chosen cultural market society will install itself universally, and along with it, global postmodernity as a “situation” of general human culture in the twenty-first century.

Postmodernity critiques the universalist and “foundationalist” pretensions of modern reason (Richard Rorty), but it critiques it as “modern” and not as “European” or “North American.” In principle, postmodernity also articulates a respect for other cultures in terms of their incommensurability, difference, and autonomy, though it expresses this in general, and not specifically with respect to Chinese, Hindustani, Islamic, African Bantu, and Latin American cultures (the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor are examples). It is not sufficiently aware of the “positivity” of these cultures, which have been excluded by the colonial process of early modernity (1492–1789), and by the “enlightened” industrial globalization of mature modernity (1789–1989), which Wallerstein (1995) situates under the hegemony of liberal politico-economic ideology, opposed to the conservative and socialist ideologies.

Postmodernity’s “post” does not eliminate its Eurocentrism since postmodernity assumes that future humanity obviously will reach the same “cultural situation” as postmodern Europe and the United States to the degree that humanity modernizes by the process of “globalization” (which is considered irreversible and inevitable). This belief in modernizing “inevitability” makes postmodernity profoundly Eurocentric. It cannot imagine that the cultures whose positivity has been excluded by the modern (since 1492) and enlightened colonial processes (since 1789, when Europe attained industrial hegemony in the world-system due to the disappearance of preindustrial—but not premodern—China and Hindustan) might be able to develop in an autonomous, “modern,” and creative fashion their

own “universal” cultures in the next stage, that is, the stage after the extinction of European–North American modernity with its claims to “sole” universality, beyond its present crisis, beyond its limit, beyond modernity’s “post”-modern moment.<sup>22</sup> It is necessary then, to think this matter more radically.

Totality’s “exteriority” (a metacategory that Marx proposed without making explicit [see Jay 1984]) was consciously and productively created by Emmanuel Levinas (1969). With it, Levinas began the critique of “modern reason” differently than Heidegger and his French successors (such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida). Levinas is one of the initiators of French postmodernism,<sup>23</sup> even though he does not adhere to this movement. The metacategory “exteriority” can illuminate an analysis of the cultural “positivity” not included by modernity, an analysis based not on postmodernity’s suppositions but rather on those of what I have called “trans”-modernity. That is to say, exteriority is a process that takes off, originates, and mobilizes itself from an “other” place (one “beyond” the “world” and modernity’s “Being,” one that maintains a certain exteriority, as figure 2 indicates)<sup>24</sup> than European and North American modernity. From this “exteriority,” negated and excluded by hegemonic Europe’s modern expansion, there are present-day cultures that predate European modernity, that have developed together with it, and that have survived until the present with enough human potential to give birth to a cultural plurality that will emerge after modernity and capitalism. These living and productive cultures, creative and in otherness [*di-ferentes*], are not just postmodern, since “postmodern” only labels a final stage of modernity. Rather, they are cultures that have developed on a “trans”-modern horizon, something beyond the internal possibility of simple modernity. This “beyond” (“trans-”) indicates the take-off point from modernity’s exteriority (arrow *E* in figure 2), that is, from what modernity excluded, denied, ignored as “insignificant,” “senseless,” “barbarous,” as a “nonculture,” an unknown opaque alterity, but at the same time evaluated as “savage,” uncivilized, underdeveloped, inferior, merely “Oriental despotism,” the “Asiatic mode of production,” and so on. These are the diverse names given to the nonhuman, the unrecoverable, the “historyless,” to what will be extinguished by the sweeping advance of Western “civilization” in the process of globalization.

Like the tropical jungles with their immense quantity of plants and animals genetically essential for the future of humanity, the majority of humanity’s cultures excluded by modernity (which are not, and will not be, postmodern) and by globalization (because misery is “necessity

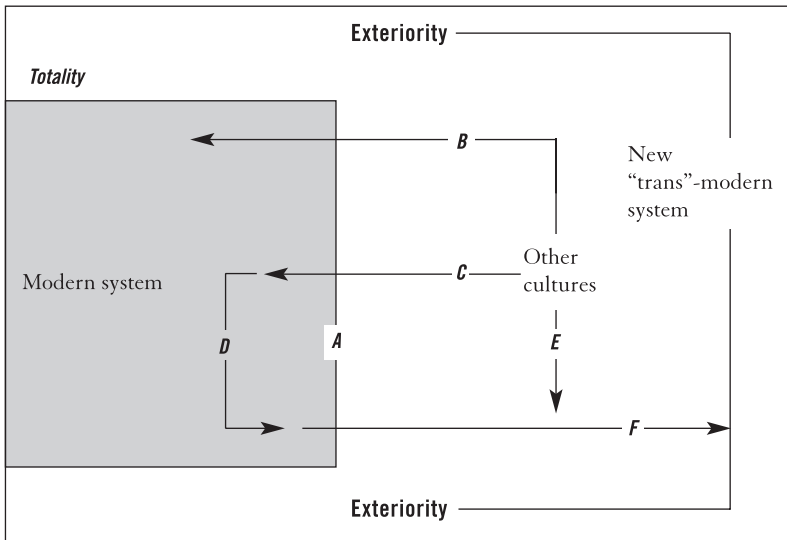


Figure 2. *Totality, exteriority, affirmation of exteriority.* Key:  
 (A) “postmodernity” (the limit of modernity and of totality);  
 (B) the inclusion of the other into the same (the old system); (C) the  
 innovative interpellation before modernity; (D) the subsumption  
 of modernity’s positivity; (E) the affirmation of the other in its exteriority;  
 (F) the construction (as a synthesis of C + D + E)  
 of an innovative “trans”-modernity.

without money,” without solvency, and therefore is not of the market) retains an immense capacity for and reserve of cultural invention essential for humanity’s survival. This creativity will also be needed if humanity is to redefine its relationship with nature based on ecology and interhuman solidarity, instead of reductively defining it on the solipsistic and schizoid criterion of increasing rates of profit.

If it is true that European–North American modernity has had economic and military hegemony over other cultures (Chinese, South-east Asian, Hindustani, Islamic, Bantu, Latin American [mestizo, Aymara, Quechua, Maya], etc.) for only the last two hundred years—and over Africa for only a little more than one hundred years, since 1885—then this is not

enough time to penetrate the “ethico-mythical nucleus” (to borrow Paul Ricoeur’s term) of the intentional cultural millenary structures. It is therefore no miracle that the consciousness of these ignored and excluded cultures is on the rise, along with the discovery of their disparaged identities. The same thing is happening with the regional cultures dominated and silenced by European modernity, such as the Galician, Catalan, Basque, and Andalusian cultures in Spain; the diverse regions and cultural nations in Italy (especially the Mezzogiorno), Germany (especially Bavaria and the five Länder of the East), France, and even the United Kingdom (where the Scottish, Irish, and other groups, like the Québécois in Canada, struggle for the recognition of their identities); and the minorities in the United States (especially Afro-Americans and Hispanics). All of this outlines a multipolar twenty-first century world, where cultural difference is increasingly affirmed, beyond the *homogenizing* pretensions of the present capitalist globalization and its supposedly universal culture, and even beyond the postmodern affirmation of difference that finds it difficult to imagine cultural universalities from a millenary tradition outside of Europe and the United States. This “trans”-modernity should adopt the best that the modern technological revolution has to offer—discarding antiecollogical and exclusively Western aspects—and put it at the service of differentiated valorized worlds, ancient and actualized, with their own traditions and ignored creativity. This will allow the emergence of the enormous cultural and human richness that the transnational capitalist market now attempts to suppress under the empire of “universal” commodities that materially subsume food (one of the most difficult things to universalize) into capital. The future “trans”-modernity will be multicultural, versatile, hybrid, postcolonial, pluralist, tolerant, and democratic (but beyond the modern liberal democracy of the European state). It will have splendid millenary traditions<sup>25</sup> and be respectful of exteriority and heterogeneous identities. The majority of humanity retains, reorganizes (renovating and including elements of globality),<sup>26</sup> and creatively develops cultures in its everyday, enlightened horizon. The cultures of this majority deepen the valorative “common sense” of their participants’ real and particular existences, countering the exclusionary process of globalization, which precisely because of this process inadvertently “pushes” toward a “trans”-modernity. It is a return to the consciousness of the great majorities of humanity, of their excluded historical unconscious!

Samuel Huntington, an ideologue of U.S. hegemony, sees as a “clash,” as a “war” between civilizations,<sup>27</sup> what is simply and positively



the irreversible uprising of universal cultures excluded by modernity (and postmodernity). These cultures, in their full creative potential and together with a redefined Western culture (European and North American culture without its reductive claim to universality), constitute a more human and complex world, more passionate and diverse, a manifestation of the fecundity that the human species has shown for millennia, a “trans-modern” world. A humanity that only spoke in English and that could only refer to “its” past as an Occidental past would testify to the extinction of the majority of historical human cultural creativity. It would be the greatest castration imaginable and irreversible in humanity’s world history!

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### Notes

1. The “Global Culture” section of the *Human Development Report 1999* indicates that between 1980 and 1995 the number of television sets around the world rose from 121 to 235 per thousand inhabitants. Television is becoming the media with the most cultural influence: “Once-thriving film industries around the world declined in the 1970s and 1980s, a result of the rise of television” (UNDP 1999, 33). But television has had a massive world presence for only the past twenty years. I say “only” because a culture’s “ethical-mythical nucleus” (to use Paul Ricoeur’s words) takes centuries to construct and deconstruct itself. Also, the production of films and programs continues to be predominantly regional. India produces 84 percent of the films seen within the country; while Latin America only produces 30 percent of the movies viewed by its public (in contrast, 62 percent of films seen in Latin America are North American). But in the television industry the programming in regional languages and with local producers is absolutely predominant worldwide. The massive outside influence lessens notably in this case.
2. Until that time, as we will see, it was clearly understood in Europe that the most advanced cultural “center” was in the South (as Martin Bernal [1987] has shown, the Islamic South, from the Maghreb to Egypt, was for Europeans the place of “classic” culture) and in the East (including the Islamic world starting at Baghdad, although this region had been sent into crisis by the attack of the Ottoman Empire), to Hindustan and China. Janet Abu-Lughod’s *Before*

*European Hegemony* (1989), which starts with France and Flanders and moves eastward, is a history that begins “from Europe” without being Eurocentric.

3. In *The Spirit of Laws* (1989 [1748], 128), Montesquieu writes, “Therefore, China is a despotic state whose principle is fear.” In 1762 Nicolas Antoine Boulanger published his *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental*. This terminology, completely false and distorting, persists to the present day.
4. Now it would include Amsterdam’s intra-European hegemony, as well as France and the United Kingdom before the Industrial Revolution.
5. Ninety-four percent of the tubers used for human nourishment in the nineteenth century came from Indian America.
6. The “first” Eurocentrism is that of Hegel or Weber, who presumed the superiority of Europe, a superiority proven only by factors that were internal to that continent. The “second” type of Eurocentrism, now superseding the first, still thinks from Europe, although it accepts that Europe established its dominion by means that came from “outside” (American precious metals, for example). This “outside” allowed it to triumph in the competition that started in 1492 with the Islamic, African, and Asian world. The narrative descriptions always begin from Europe. Africa or Asia is the “external” world, far away and in the past. I am attempting to overcome this “second” Eurocentrism by showing the meaning of “trans”-modernity as an alternative project.
7. I call it the “interregional-system” (Asiatic-Afro-Mediterranean) and not the “*world-system*” because it does not yet include the Americas, since we are still talking about a time before 1492.
8. For critiques of Frank, see Amin 1999, Arrighi 1999, and Wallerstein 1999. I accept almost all the critiques that these authors make, but all three admit that Frank has pointed out a forgotten truth: the importance of China. And I say “forgotten” because China was the system’s largest producer until the eighteenth century, it had the largest population, and so on. The description of the world-system should take seriously and start with China; before Frank no one had done this.
9. I accept Frank’s critiques that the “Asiatic mode of production” concept is, to use Edward Said’s term, an “Orientalist” fallacy, but it is a stretch to think this renders meaningless the concepts of “value,” “capital,” and “capitalism.” What emerges is an interesting question that Frank does not ask: Was China between 1400 and 1800 a mercantile capitalist country? I believe he has supplied sufficient reasons to begin to affirm (as a subject for future discussions) that China had regions where modes of protocapitalist manufacturing production were seriously developed on the level of the “formal subsumption” of surplus value in the labor process (but without “material subsumption,” and

thus without “real subsumption”) in “capital” sensu stricto, thus obtaining “surplus value” (*Mehrwert*)—in the conceptual sense that Marx develops in *Capital*—in the factories or artisanal workshops [*trabajadurias*], found in so many Chinese cities, where such goods as porcelain, pottery, and silk textiles were produced. Samir Amin (1999) is correct in showing that the Chinese state—which had great organization and power—never allowed a growing bourgeoisie (the eunuchs?) to take control, and that it thus impeded the normal growth of capitalism. In any case, Frank’s work allows us to formulate creative questions that he himself asks, and others that he does not ask or answer adequately, since he has for a long time neglected Marx’s category of “value” (and not only “exchange value”).

10. It should not be forgotten that in the fifteenth century, when England had 3 million inhabitants, Spain 10 million, France 18 million, and all of Europe 69 million, there were 125 million Chinese. In 1800 Europe had 188 million inhabitants and China almost double that: 345 million (Frank 1998, 168).
11. Among these causes were China’s low salaries, which did not permit the use of machines. This left it at a capitalist level of manufacturing of porcelain and silk textiles with creation of absolute surplus value, having only formally subsumed the artisanal process of traditional production. The political crisis between the Manchurian dynasty and central China, the need to finish the colonization of the South, and the occupation of the West of China (a territory almost double China’s greatest previous size), enclosed China within its own borders, causing it to lose interest in the external market. This produced a vacuum that would be filled by Europe, especially the United Kingdom. China’s loss of the oceans and the imperial state’s repression of the emerging bourgeoisie mark the differences with England, an island with a monarchy in crisis.
12. For Weber’s study of the prophets of Israel, see Weber 1920–21; partially translated into English in Weber 1951 and 1958. For Weber on Calvinist ethics, see Weber 1952. For my part, I began a critique of Eurocentrism (in the opposite sense of Weber’s) in order to show how the “ethos of the prophets” was critical of modernity (Dussel 1969).
13. However, the capitalist development of Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan—ethically neo-Confucian in inspiration—shows us the faults in Weber’s hypotheses; Confucian corporate family relations are perfectly suited to the organization of a capitalist enterprise, even a transnational one, and with greater effectiveness.
14. I recently came across an art journal in which I read that on 14 December 1600 a three hundred-ton galleon, the *San Diego*, sailed from Manila and was destroyed by

Dutch pirates. “In 1991, when the remains of the shipwreck were discovered, more than five thousand pieces came to the surface[,] . . . more than eight hundred blue and white porcelain pieces from the Ming period, twenty-four sword guards, gold, and silver coins . . . Chinese ceramics” (Campollo 1997, 59).

15. In the same art journal I just quoted we find the article “A Singular Example of English Furniture: The Windsor Cabinet” by A. de Neuvillate, who says that in 1720 John Belchier made a writing desk [*secreter*] (of which Neuvillate includes a photograph) “in black lacquered wood” with “legs and Japanese scenes.” In the desk’s small doors appear “two characters from Japanese mythology whose refinement speaks for the hierarchy of eighteenth-century English furniture.” This indicates that the incorporation of Oriental figures was very fashionable in eighteenth-century England. One may suspect that the figures are Chinese, and that Belchier only polished the desk, because its execution is clearly imperial. “The mastery of the cabinetmaker and painter” that Neuvillate passes off as English was more likely Chinese. In 1996 the piece was worth \$1.5 million (Neuvillate 1997, 8).

The Manchu dynasty, as I have already indicated, conquered China’s West in 1724, occupying Tibet, Sinkiang (from Tarim to Dzungaria or Russian Turkestan), Mongolia, including Manchuria in the North, and in the South establishing borders—starting at the Sinkiang River—with Burma, Siam, and Vietnam.

16. Indeed, the Islamic expansion that started in 623 A.D. “separated” (cut) a good part of Latin-Mediterranean Europe, along with Germanic-Northern Europe, from the “third interregional system”—for which Baghdad was the commercial “turntable,” and in which China and Hindustan had the greatest productive weight.
17. Hindustan turned toward Sri Lanka, Burma, Indonesia, and Melaka, which comprised the western maritimes of the Chinese market.
18. “For example if the market, i.e. the sphere of exchange, expands, then production grows in quantity and the divisions between its different branches become deeper” (Marx 1973, 99). It “expands” for the United Kingdom and tightens for China and Hindustan; “production” “grows” for the United Kingdom because it has grown tighter in China and Hindustan.
19. In New England this was not the reason for the use of machines (or for the Industrial Revolution); rather, machines were used because the U.S. North had even fewer small property owners who worked the land with their own hands. In New England the machine was necessary to augment the productivity of free labor (to allow the greatest number of product units or hectares to be worked

by the worker–property owner). In Spanish America the existence of cheap and plentiful indigenous and African slave labor (in this way similar to the Anglo-Saxon colonies of the U.S. South) obviated the immediate need for an industrial revolution, as was the case in China and Hindustan.

20. This is how the “Orientalist” ideology was born.
21. I examine this concept in Dussel 1985.
22. By “modernization” I mean to suggest here that the millenary cultures (Chinese, Hindu, Islamic, etc.) can use certain technical and hermeneutic moments that permit them to instrumentally “actualize” their productive mediations (such as the material objects of culture, but also the production of “meaning,” with more refined scientific interpretations).

The Chinese, Vedanta, Buddhist, and Islamic cultures (among others) are “universal” in the sense that they were born and have developed in dialogue with multiple regional cultures that they represent and have included in their cultural process. These regional “universal” cultures have no difficulty in “subsuming” the technological, scientific, and advanced mathematical world. Their own millenary history has creative-scientific moments of “enlightenment” (think, for example, of the Baghdad school of mathematics in the tenth century A.D., or the Chinese philosophical schools of the “warrior states” before the organization of the Han Empire). They have been “left behind” in the last two centuries . . . that is all. Their capacity for development is intact, and they are now experiencing rapid growth.

23. See, for example, Derrida’s early article “Violence et métaphysique” (1964).
24. This would be E in figure 1: the Amerindian and Afro-Caribbean cultures. The same goes for the Bantu cultures and, since the “decline” of the “Orient,” for Islamic, Indian, Southeast Asian, and Chinese cultures. Eighty-five percent of humanity suffers from the market capitalist process of globalization, under the military power of the United States (since 1989). Hampered by its state of poverty, this overwhelming majority struggles to conserve alimentary traditions, architecture, clothing styles, music, everyday understanding of religious existence, and so on. The whole “qualitative” world of values that explain and motivate the day-to-day existence of the vast majorities of the poor and the impoverished (that is to say, those unable to buy global capitalism’s commodities) maintains a certain “exteriority,” and is thus “beyond” the globalized market. Globalization and exclusion are joined in one simultaneous movement.
25. When the New York Metropolitan Museum presented the exhibition “Thirty Centuries of Art in Mexico,” the “average American” could not help but be surprised and wonder how it was possible that a people as “underdeveloped”

as the Mexicans could have so much “history,” considering that North American culture (if we begin in 1620) is only a little more than three centuries old.

26. I would like to distinguish between (1) a positive globality, which allows humanity to enter almost instantaneously into contact with its historical occurrence [*acontecer*], a global structure that we need to know how to use for the differentiated development of the great non-Western, traditional cultures; and (2) merely “globalization” as a world strategy instrumentally controlled by transnational corporations and the central metropolitan states, all, in the last instance, under the hegemony of the U.S. military.
27. For this “warrior” intellectual (he appears as such when, for example, he writes of the need to maintain Western technological and military superiority over other civilizations [Huntington 1996, 312]) the Muslims, Chinese, Russians, and others present “dangers.” All the cultures excluded and dominated by modernity appear as military “dangers.” The warrior obsession needs to be tempered by a respect for other universal cultures, the creative fruit of the same humanity of which Huntington is part. Or does this intellectual from Harvard—where I had the pleasure of teaching in order to oppose these exclusionist ideologies—believe that humanity is a predicate only attributable to the European–North American human being? Huntington is clearly against “internationalism” and “multilateralism,” and only in favor of his country’s adopting a policy of “close cooperation with its European partners to protect and advance the interests and values of the unique civilization they share” (*ibid.*). All civilizations are “unique,” but Huntington believes that the “singularity” of Western culture allows it to cynically claim its right to military and economic rule over other cultures!

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